

Micronesia

Preserving a Fragile Resource

In the western Pacific Ocean, straddled between the Philippines and Hawaii, some 2,100 islands are scattered over three million square miles. These islands make up the area known as Micronesia. Their total landmass is smaller than Rhode Island. The islands' unique landscapes, formed in part by volcanic activity and featuring coral atolls, rain forests, and colorful lagoons, fostered a world of exceptional cultures. Its geographic area has been strategically important to many nations in the past.

The rich history reflects a panorama of societies buffeted for centuries by warring and trading nations of the east and west. Evidence indicates that the islands were first settled over 2,000 years ago. Vigorous and diverse cultures developed in each island group, linked by a far-flung network of trade and commerce conducted by intrepid voyagers in outrigger canoes.

Spanish sailors, including Magellan, were the first Europeans to explore Micronesia. The Marianas served as a stopping point for the famous Manila Galleon trade. They found inhabited islands rich in copra, sandalwood, turtle and pearl, schools of whales, and established colonies on many of the islands. The Spanish flag flew

over the Northern Marianas and Guam beginning in the 1500s.

In 1885, Germany took possession of the Marshall Islands (RMI), while Spain retained control of other island groups. By 1898, however, all of Spain's possessions had been sold to Germany, with the exception of Guam, which had been taken by the United States during the Spanish-American War.

After Germany's defeat in World War I, Japan administered most of Micronesia under a League of Nations mandate. Fierce battles between the Japanese and Allied Forces were fought on the islands during World War II. After the war, the United States administered much of Micronesia under United Nations auspices. The islands, except for Guam, Nauru, and Kiribati, were known as the Trust Territory of the Pacific Islands.

Guam remains a territory of the United States. The Republic of Nauru and the vast atoll group of the Republic of Kiribati, both members of the British Commonwealth, are independent nations. In the 1970s, citizens of the old Trust Territory organized four new governments: the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands, the Federated States of Micronesia (FSM), the RMI, and the Republic of Palau. Of these, the Marianas are an American Commonwealth and the other three are in a unique relationship with the United States known as "Free Association."

The Micronesia Institute

In recognition that a true private sector resource could be helpful as the Micronesian peoples worked their way out from under the various foreign cultures and governments, which had been imposed on them since the time of Magellan, the Micronesia Institute (MI) was founded in 1983. The 501-c-3 corporation's mission statement reads in part: "...founded to be an independent link between Micronesian countries and communities and public and private resources in the United States and elsewhere." Its

The Chuuk, FSM, speaker tells how he saw U.S. bombers hitting Japanese ships in the lagoon during World War II. There are stories and chants throughout Micronesia of the times before that war, some relating to the German occupation of the islands. The Micronesian Endowment for Historic Preservation seeks to preserve these songs and legends. Photo by the author.



The parapets of Nan Dowas curve outward; overhangs gave further protection against intruders. Nan Madol's basalt logs and boulders may weigh up to 46 tons each. These were probably quarried on the mountain called Sokehs Rock, 30 miles away on the other side of Ponape Island, then rolled down the mountain and somehow ferried to the site on the reef and hoisted into position. Photo by the author.



purpose is to enable Micronesians themselves to initiate, develop, and execute needed programs, with expertise and funding as necessary. Programs focus on education, health, historic preservation, privatization, and community service organizations, all to improve the quality of life. Visibility in the United States and the education of

Americans about Micronesians and their cultures are also important functions of the organization.

The Micronesian Endowment for Historic Preservation

Associated with the MI, the unique Micronesian Endowment for Historic Preservation (MEHP) is an international non-profit organization incorporated in the RMI in 1985. In 1984 and 1985 it began to be realized by Micronesian cultural leaders and by MI that there was real danger that in the future cultural programs might not be funded even at a minimal level. Conversations and meetings brought the leaders on both sides of the Pacific to consider ways whereby private funds could begin to supplement government grants. Historic preserva-

tion officers (HPOs) of the various entities, meeting with members of MI, came to believe that an endowment for historic preservation and cultural growth, and which encompassed the entire Micronesian cultural family, would be the most effective means for ensuring that adequate resources could be found.

The Articles of Incorporation and the Bylaws were prepared with the help of the Alele Museum in the Marshall Islands and with the participation of all HPOs. A MI ad hoc committee of lawyers and international cultural endowment experts reviewed these to ensure full compliance with international non-profit standards. The committee also suggested that if the endowment hoped to raise international money, it should stand independently without more than associative ties to any American organization.

The world's only organization of its kind, the MEHP crosses national boundaries to build a loose bridge uniting members of the same cultural family to ensure the survival of their ancient arts, sacred or historic sites, and traditions into the 21st century. A board of directors appointed by the respective governments manages the MEHP. Officers rotate from one nation or state to another. The MI provided expert reviews of the Articles of



Incorporation and Bylaws to ensure that the unusual organization would comply with international nonprofit standards. It has also been able to provide funding for brochures and meetings through The Henry Luce Foundation, Inc., Continental Micronesia, and Mobil Oil Micronesia, Inc. Donations to the MEHP may be made through the MI for U.S. income tax purposes.

The structure of society on each island is a fragile resource, treasured by its people, but facing extinction in the modern world. Micronesians are committed to preserving not only their ancient artifacts but also the living traditions that give them meaning. Lore and legends are told through songs, stories, and dances.

One of the very old "story boards" in the Bai at Airai, Palau. The beams are decorated with story boards illustrating ancient legends. Later, the Palauan artists began carving the story on wood. Photo by the author.

Remarkable skills in woodcarving, canoe building, navigation, architecture, and weaving have been passed down from one generation to the next but are rapidly disappearing. Early colonial and military history has been preserved in German plantation houses and churches; Spanish fortifications; Japanese roads, buildings and ports; sunken American whalers and pirate ships. Bomb-blasted buildings, rusted cannons, and warships on the sea bottom remind us of a tragic, painful period.

Endangered Resources

The demands of modern society and a cash economy threaten important aspects of the Micronesian cultural heritage. As older generations disappear, so do ancient skills and knowledge. Younger Micronesians leave the islands to seek opportunities elsewhere. Much needed development projects, including roads, harbors, airports, and hotels, can endanger ancient sites. Artifacts are removed from prehistoric tombs and from World War II and prehistoric sites, while modernization displaces traditional values. Natural hazards such as the encroaching jungle, tidal waves, typhoons, and earthquakes erode and destroy historic dwellings. The MEHP is devoted to recording, interpreting, and maintaining aspects of Micronesia's past and to regenerating it for the future. It is a focal point in the efforts to preserve Micronesia's history and culture.

With the advice of international experts in anthropology, archeology, history, and other disciplines, Endowment funds are allocated to programs on the basis of need and the requests of donors. The MEHP is working with the Smithsonian Institution, the U.S. National Park Service, and other prominent organizations on a



wide spectrum of conservation projects relating to libraries, archives, museums, and exhibitions.

The Need for Assistance

The Micronesian peoples welcome changes that improve the standard of living, but they do not want to sacrifice their histories and cultures. Resources are in short supply. Modern museum facilities are badly needed, as are studies to document sites and cultures. Systems must be set up to ensure the endurance of lore and arts. Safeguards must be taken against souvenir seekers and vandals. The tropical climate and jungle growth that erode equipment and materials, and jungles that overrun ancient ruins, contribute to the deterioration of important sites and artifacts. Ultimately, an effective historic preservation effort will require a partnership between governments, corporations, and individuals.

Contributions to the Endowment

The MEHP envisions the peoples and cultures of Micronesia as living and growing on a solid foundation of knowledge of the Micronesian past. The challenge in fund-raising for Micronesia is quite different than for most causes in the United States though. Vital U.S. government funding for programs in Micronesia will be greatly reduced over the next decade. The Asian economic crisis also hurts. Private sources of financial assistance are required if Micronesia's historic and cultural resources are to be preserved for future generations. Funds are sought to help preserve the Micronesian cultures through the protection of customs and historical sites, and through education in traditions.

Patricia Luce Chapman is chairman and founder of the Micronesia Institute and has been deeply involved in program activities in the area, and in writing, since 1983. Previously she edited a children's magazine for the Museum of the City of New York.

Dancers from Ujae Atoll in the Republic of the Marshall Islands perform the "Jobwa," the oldest Marshallese dance still in existence today. Photo by the author.

